

Grave issues in classical Athens

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Effie Jean Robinson
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*Come blooming youths, as you pass by,
And on these lines do cast an eye,
As you are now, so once was I,
As I am now, so you must be,
Prepare for death and follow me.*

[in another hand:]

*To follow you, I am not content,
How do I know, which way you went?*

Waynesville, North Carolina

The tradition of grave markers in classical Athens stands in stark contrast to the modern gravestone, which relies on words to communicate information about the deceased – name, age, date of birth and death, consolatory epigram (although not usually accompanied by such an insolent reply as above!). On Athenian gravestones (*stelai*), however, the focus was firmly on the figured image: these commemorative stone slabs with relief decoration show the deceased either alone or with others. Inscriptions did not figure highly on the list of commemorative must-haves, and are often limited to just a name or none at all.

The classical Attic grave *stelai* can seem a fairly dull subject of study. There are literally thousands, and at first glance they tend all to look the same – lots of people shaking hands! The images on the *stelai* re-work the same compositions, re-using figures from copybooks, but they often do so in innovative ways, creating whole new compositions which are subtly differentiated. This same process is played out in both the high and lower quality examples (of which there are many), showing that the *stelai* spoke in a visual language which was available and meaningful to a wide Athenian audience, comprising both those viewing them and those erecting them. Although they are erected to individuals, the *stelai* do not employ portrait features but rather present people as one of a restricted range of types.

The grave *stelai* are never going to offer any great challenge to the favoured position of big, impressive monuments like the Parthenon in the modern imagination. But, perhaps more interestingly, closer inspection of these monuments shows that they can bring into question some of the concepts we tend to take for granted about classical Athens and can make us examine our own assumptions.

Public and private: two separate spheres?

Readers tend to assume that all texts, except letters, were public, but visual monuments and objects are regularly classified as either ‘public’ or ‘private’. The Parthenon, that great bastion of Athenian civic identity, is an obviously ‘public’ monument: it was a huge and expensive testimony to the might of Athens and Athena, erected with public monies by the city. Greek vases, on the other hand, are more easily considered as ‘private’ monuments: bought by individuals for use within the household, these may often be designed to say something positive about that household to outside visitors – for instance, at the symposium – but their ownership and use remain personal.

So where do grave *stelai* fit into this neat division? Can we say they are either public or private? Perhaps not. Grave *stelai* (together with the graves they marked) were situated in public contexts, along the roads leading into and out of settlements.

Perhaps the most well-known example is the Kerameikos, the main and most impressive cemetery of Athens sited around the Dipylon and Sacred Gates. This was the busy area that people passed through to go to Eleusis or the Academy and state war tombs, and gathered at to begin the Panathenaic procession up to the Acropolis. For sheer visibility, there is no more ‘public’ Athenian burial site. But *stelai* are ritual objects and funerary ritual is a private ritual organized around the family. The city limited the freedom of the family by passing laws restricting the funerary ritual, for instance dictating when it can take place (before dawn) and who can take part (relatives only), and one of the results of this is to draw up firmer boundaries between the public and private realms. As such, these monuments can be described as sitting on the boundary between ‘public’ and ‘private’.

This description, however, doesn’t tell the whole story, because the *stelai* don’t just sit on the boundary line but rather merge the categories of ‘public’ and ‘private’. ‘Private’ funerary ritual becomes a ‘public’ ritual when and because it is conducted before the collective eyes of the city. The *stelai* are a re-presentation of the citizen body by the citizen body to the citizen body. But they employ the imagery of the family: domestic scenes of women with maid-servants, intimate scenes of men and women shaking hands, scenes with children. In classical Athens, ‘public’ and ‘private’ are always intertwined with one another, and can never be fully separate; the modern terms don’t map neatly onto the ancient ideas. Come to think of it, has ‘private’ ever been an adequate term to describe funerary ritual and commemoration?

Women’s place is in the home?

It is now something of a cliché to say that Athens was a ‘men’s club’, but we still say it. The split between ‘public’ and ‘private’ is often linked with gender roles, where women stay at home and men’s world is the political and public world of the city: the Assembly place of the Pnyx, the lawcourts, the theatre, the agora, the gymnasium. As Pericles says in his funeral oration, the greatest glory belongs to the woman who is least spoken of in public; this is played out in the lawcourt speeches, where orators only mention women’s names when they want to shame them: the ultimate shame is Neaera’s – to have a lawcourt speech named after you! On painted pottery, women are often described as shown at worst ‘secluded’ and at best ‘separated’ from their men in the domestic interior of the house. It may be more acceptable now to label these examples as the ideal rather than the reality, but they still have an intoxicating force as descriptive models.

So, then, given the high visibility of grave *stelai* to large numbers of people, we might expect the more ‘public’ face of the household to be dominated by its menfolk. But female figures predominate, outnumbering male figures in nearly every compositional type. Women are shown alone, accompanied by other women or children, or alongside men. On one famous *stèle*, for instance, Hegeso is shown seated while a maid-servant stands beside her, holding out a box from which she removes something. Hegeso’s is one of the few *stelai* for which we have a secure material context. Displayed alongside a tall *stèle* inscribed with the names of the men from the same family who died and a *stèle* carved with a funerary vase, Hegeso’s *stèle* is the only figural decoration and Hegeso herself quite literally is

the 'face' of the household.

Women were, in any case, the public face of the household at the funeral. The funerary ritual itself was heavily gendered and women played an important role, preparing the corpse and lamenting over the body. Funerary legislation particularly restricts female actions, limiting female participants based on how closely they were related to the deceased and prescribing what they can do (e.g. walk behind the men) and cannot do (e.g. lacerate their faces with their nails). White-ground *lekythoi* (oil flasks), themselves placed in graves, show women as the primary visitors to graves, often without male chaperones, presumably carrying out the continuing rituals that happen in the weeks and months after death. Funerary ritual, then, not only puts represented women on show but also brings real women out of their homes and into the city. This can be represented as dangerous, as in Lysias 1 where it is at a funeral that the speaker's wife meets the man who will become her lover. None the less, considering that mortality was high, funerals were by no means uncommon and women must have regularly attended both burials and subsequent ritual at the grave. If the *stelai* were designed for display, then women, too, were on show as they conducted ritual. How much of an ideal, then, was the 'ideal' of female 'seclusion'?

Sex and death: never the twain shall meet?

Often, the abiding image we have of Greek art is of the youthful Greek male nude, popular from the earliest archaic *kouroi* (statues of young men) through to the proliferation of images of Antinous under the Roman emperor Hadrian, and beyond. As the naked, softly muscled, and deftly displayed male body is the most common 'costume' for young Greek men, it is not surprising that on grave *stelai* Athenian youths are often shown naked. But whereas it has become increasingly acceptable to discuss these male bodies on the Parthenon frieze and Greek vases alike in terms of the homoerotic relations between an older male lover and a younger male beloved – as sexy boys, no less – these labels are far less often applied to the similarly naked bodies found on the *stelai*.

If the nude body of the unbearded young man on *stelai* conforms to the standard way in which young males engaged in same-sex love affairs are represented, female bodies too can be displayed as desirable. Hegeso wears diaphanous clothing that clings to her body, emphasising her breasts (her nipples pushing through the fabric) and her legs. Not all women are shown this way, just as not all youths are shown nude, but many of these figures are represented as sexual objects. It seems to have been acceptable, then, to represent the dead as desirable, and to do so before a wide audience group.

A stele found on the bed of the Ilissos river shows a naked young man leaning nonchalantly back against a pillar while an old man gazes at him. The most common way of understanding this *stèle* is to read the figures as father and son. But, given the nudity of the youth and the intense gaze of the older man, and the lack of inscriptions to prove that they are father and son, we might also read the young man and the bearded man as lovers. The old man here becomes an equivalent to Socrates in Plato's *Charmides*, who becomes 'inflamed' as he catches sight of a young athlete's body inside his cloak. Such a reading becomes more pressing given the way the young man stares out of the stele, inviting the viewer to gaze upon and desire this youth in turn. This raises questions about how far figures on *stelai* represent the household as a family unit; or rather, how far is household-identity reduced to familial-identity alone?

What appeared at first to be a group of unimaginatively similar monuments are actually a very potent means of engaging with classical Greek culture. Even though no account of viewing a stele survives (nor does any graffiti-ed, insolent rejoinder inscribed for posterity on the stone itself), thinking about viewing the *stelai* lets us think about Greek culture more generally. It is very easy to map a modern understanding onto ancient

conceptions, and, indeed, some similarity is necessary for us to engage with the ancient world at all: if classical Athens were wholly different from the Western world today, we would struggle to know where to begin when it came to looking at grave *stelai*. But if a closer look at the classical Attic grave *stelai* raises questions about how we have traditionally understood these objects, then it also raises questions about how we understand ancient concepts in relation to modern ones. In particular, these are all questions relating to 'public' and 'private': are these purely spatial terms (public is to city as private is to household), or are they gendered (man is to public as woman is to private)? Sexuality poses an additional problem, because it seems to fit neither in the 'public' or the 'private' world exclusively for ancient Athenians. But also, and quite importantly, thinking about how ancient and modern concepts relate to one another can make us realise that these are questions which still have meaning for us today.

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